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The New Sensationists: Shi Zhecun, Mu Shiying, and Liu Na'ou,

Introduction

The three writers under consideration here—Shi Zhecun (1905–2003), Mu Shiying (1912–1940), and Liu Na'ou (1905–1940)—were the foremost modernist authors in the Republican period. Collectively labelled “New Sensationists” (xinganjuepai), they were mainly active in Shanghai in the early 1930s, and their most famous works reflect the speed, chaos, and intensity of the metropolis.¹ They wrote about dance halls, neon lights, and looming madness alongside modern lifestyles, gender roles, and social problems. The city becomes a dizzying mix of sensory impressions and diametric opposites, enticing and modern but also callous, corrupt, and dehumanizing. Their works experimented with new literary forms, themes, and narrative techniques in order to capture the sights and sounds of the city as well as the sense of alienation and fatigue stemming from an inability to keep up with the pace of change.

The New Sensationist writers were mostly opposed to the prevailing trends in contemporary Chinese literature. They resisted the increasing politicization of art encouraged by the prominent League of Left-Wing Writers (1930–1936), and they saw themselves as an avant-garde that rejected the tenets of realism and social engagement promoted by the cultural elite at the time.

The short stories representing the modernity and sexuality of Republican Shanghai have become these authors' most well-known works, e.g. Shi Zhecun's “One Evening in the Rainy Season” (Meiyu zhi xi, 1929) and Mu Shiying's “Five in a Nightclub” (Yezonghuili de wu ge ren, 1932)—both discussed later. But such short stories do not reflect the entirety of these writers' oeuvres. Shi Zhecun was interested in traditional Chinese literature as well as modern psychology, and these interests feature prominently in his works, spanning broadly from gothic horror to careful explorations of the repressed yearnings of petty bourgeois characters. Mu Shiying's early writings also range more widely, with his early works focusing on the fury, violence, and sexual frustration of thugs and bandits.

The “New Sensationism” classification should be accompanied by a note of caution. Rather than forming a clearly self-identified group, the writers discussed here were lumped together by their critics. The term originally denoted a group of Japanese writers (shinkankaku ha) who were inspired during the 1920s by Western modernist art movements, such as Futurism, Expressionism, and Dadaism.² Key members included Kawabata Yasunari, who later won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968, and Yokomitsu Riichi. In 1931, the Marxist critic Lou Shiyi used “New Sensationism” in a harsh critique of Shi Zhecun's short stories, arguing that they were influenced by the Japanese movement and that this aesthetic was influenced by the “Erotic” and the “Grotesque”.³ Lou concluded that Shi's fiction was “the literature of those who live by reaping the interests of capitalism”.⁴ Shi objected to the label, arguing in 1933 that he wrote “psychological fiction” influenced by Freud.⁵ Despite Shi Zhecun's attempts to distance himself from the New Sensationist category, it remains widely used today. Regardless of the term's origin as an insult, it is useful to have a way to denote

these writers as a group. They were quite different in many ways, but there are still notable similarities in their works and they worked closely with each other for several years.

Formation and History

The origins of the New Sensationist group can be traced back to the late 1920s at Aurora University (Zhendan daxue) in Shanghai.⁶ The main members were Shi Zhecun, Dai Wangshu, Su Wen (also known as Du Heng), Liu Na'ou, and Feng Xuefeng. The group edited the minor literary journals *Pearl Necklace Trimonthly* (Yingluo xunkan) and *Trackless Train* (Wugui lieche) featuring their own works and translations.⁷ After *Trackless Train* was shut down by government censors in 1929, some of them started a new journal, *La Nouvelle Littérature* (Xin wenyi) which saw eight issues published before it too was closed by government censors. They also ran a publishing house, the Frontline Bookstore (Diyi xian shudian), later renamed Froth Bookstore (Shuimo shudian), which issued their creative writing and translations.

The funding for these endeavours was provided by Liu Na'ou who was born into a wealthy family in Taiwan in 1905. Liu spoke fluent Japanese and in 1920 he was sent to high school and college in Japan.⁸ Upon graduation, he went to Shanghai in 1926 where he studied French at Aurora University. Following a visit to Japan in the late 1920s, Liu Na'ou returned with several works by modernist Japanese authors which he then translated and published. Liu also introduced the French modernist writer Paul Morand who had influenced the Japanese New Sensationists. Liu Na'ou only published a single short story collection, *Scène* (Dushi fengjingxian), in 1930, with his later work was more focused on film, writing screenplays and editing a film journal, *Modern Cinema* (Xiandai dianying).

Shi Zhecun was born in Hangzhou and grew up in Songjiang near Shanghai. He too started studying French at Aurora University in 1926. He learned English as well and translated several works from their English translations, including Arthur Schnitzler's *Frau Berta Garlan* in 1929.⁹ Schnitzler's novels had a considerable influence on Shi's literary work alongside the work of Havelock Ellis, Edgar Allan Poe, and others.¹⁰

Born and raised in Shanghai, Mu Shiyong became affiliated with the group when he published his first short story, "Our World" (Zanmen de shijie), in the February 1930 issue of *La Nouvelle Littérature*.¹¹ He was still only 17 and a student at Kwang Hua University (Guanghua daxue).¹² Shi Zhecun introduced the young author in an editorial comment:

Mu Shiyong is a name that is unfamiliar to readers. He is a new author who can make the "great authors" who merely flaunt their undeserved reputations feel ashamed. With respect to Ideologie, "Our World" is admittedly somewhat lacking, but in artistic terms it is very successful. This is a young author of whom we can have great expectations.¹³

Mu Shiyong's political views were found wanting, and this was perhaps Feng Xuefeng's leftist influence, but this quote also demonstrated how the group rejected the mainstream literary establishment of the time—the "great authors" with their "undeserved reputations".

This constituted an attack on the New Culture Movement writers who by 1930 were well-known figures. Shi Zhecun confirmed this to Leo Ou-fan Lee many years later, explaining that the young writers saw themselves as an avant-garde who were “revolutionary and aesthetic rebels on an international ‘front line’”.¹⁴

At the time, cultural discussions were increasingly dominated by political ideology and the League of Left-Wing Writers’ calls for proletarian literature, so the New Sensationist group stood out in its refusal to bow to such demands. Indeed, leftist critics were generally quite negative about their writing. In 1932, Qu Qiubai wrote a scathing critique of Mu’s short story “The Man Who Was Made a Plaything” (Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi, 1931), claiming that he was a traitor to the leftist cause.¹⁵ According to another League reviewer the same year, the main problem with Mu Shiyong’s writing was that he failed to “discuss the upright struggle of the proletarian classes”.¹⁶ Mu Shiyong responded to such criticism in the preface to his next short story collection, *Public Cemetery* (Gongmu, 1933):

I am unwilling, as so many are today, to adorn my true face with some protective pigment, or to pass my days in hypocrisy shouting hypocritical slogans, or to manipulate the psychology of the masses, engaging in political manoeuvring, self-propaganda, and the like to maintain a position once held in the past or to enhance my personal prestige. I consider this to be base and narrow-minded behaviour, and I won’t do it.¹⁷

Much like Shi Zhecun, Mu Shiyong opposed the politicized cultural milieu with its “hypocritical slogans” as well as the more famous authors trying to “maintain a position once held in the past”. This denunciation of his leftist critics ensured him the enmity of the League of Left-Wing Writers.

By this time, Mu Shiyong was already a minor celebrity in literary circles. He was considered quite a dandy—strikingly handsome and a frequent visitor of the dance halls he wrote about. In 1934, he even married a dance hall hostess, Qiu Peipei, causing a bit of a stir. Mu was not a prolific writer, but he did publish several collections of short stories: *North Pole*, *South Pole* (Nanbeiji, 1932, expanded edition in 1933), *Public Cemetery*, and *Statue of a Platinum Woman* (Baijin de nūti suxiang, 1934).¹⁸ In the late 1930s he produced less fiction, like Liu Na’ou becoming quite interested in the techniques and possibilities of cinema.

Les Contemporains and Independent Literature

In 1931, the Froth Bookstore closed and the group disbanded. Liu Na’ou returned to Japan for a while, and Shi Zhecun went back to Songjiang where he took up teaching.¹⁹ Shortly afterwards, however, Shi was offered the post of managing editor of a new literary journal, mainly because he was neither affiliated with the Guomindang nor with the League of Left-Wing Writers.²⁰ Shi accepted the offer, and the new journal published its first issue in May 1932. This was *Les Contemporains* (Xiandai). With its dual titles in Chinese and French and the inaugural cover displaying cubist artwork, the journal instantly conveyed cosmopolitan sophistication. It featured modern poetry, fiction, essays, articles, and many translations of

foreign literature.²¹ The articles often covered various Western literary movements, but there were also book reviews, biographies, and reproductions of modern art. The journal aimed to keep educated urban readers abreast with the latest trends and developments in contemporary culture in China and across the world.

Les Contemporains was a success and it placed Shi Zhecun in an important position on the Shanghai cultural scene. He managed to garner broad support for the journal and tried to keep it outside the fray of political discussions. In the editor's statement in the first issue, Shi declared that it would be independent of politics and factionalism and that manuscripts would be chosen for publication "solely according to the subjective criteria of the editor, and these criteria naturally rest on the intrinsic worth of the literary product itself".²² Since political journals tended to get banned fairly quickly, many of China's most important writers and poets of the time published in *Les Contemporains*, both League writers and independents, including Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Yu Dafu, Shen Congwen, Zhang Tianyi, and Lao She.

The journal also became a major vehicle to showcase the works of the New Sensationist writers and their friends, and it enabled Shi Zhecun to cultivate modernist Chinese literature. Mu Shiying contributed quite a few pieces, and it also carried the poetry of the main exponents of symbolist and modernist poetry in China at the time—Dai Wangshu, Mu Mutian, Bian Zhilin, He Qifang, and others.

Despite the desire to stay independent, *Les Contemporains* became embroiled in the intensifying literary debates on the proper role of literature in society. This accelerated after Su Wen joined Shi Zhecun as co-editor.²³ In 1932, Su Wen and Hu Qiuyuan claimed to be writers of "the third category" (di san zhong ren) or "free men" (ziyou ren), a label indicating their independence of political affiliations. But in the polarized atmosphere of the time, a claim of independence was necessarily a political stance in and of itself, and the League critic Zhou Yang called Su Wen a "dog" of the ruling classes.²⁴ The debacle over the "third category" dispute was more than the publishers could handle, and compounded by financial trouble, Shi Zhecun and Su Wen had to resign as editors after the publication of the November 1934 issue. After two more issues with new editors at the helm, the journal closed irrevocably.²⁵ The threat from Japan and politics were the dominant issues of the day, and there was less tolerance for highbrow cosmopolitan endeavours such as *Les Contemporains*. Shi Zhecun's next literary journal, *Literary Food Vignettes* (Wenfan xiaopin), closed after a few issues. Still, the New Sensationist writers kept in touch. Dai Wangshu even married Mu Shiying's sister in 1936 after his relationship with Shi Zhecun's sister fell through.²⁶

Following the Japanese invasion of China proper in 1937, the literary scene changed dramatically. Shi Zhecun moved to Kunming and took up teaching at Yunnan University. Mu Shiying moved to Hong Kong in 1938 where he lived for a while with several other writers before returning to Shanghai the following year where he then edited a newspaper for the Wang Jingwei government. He and Liu Na'ou started collaborating with the Japanese, even going to Japan to participate in a literary conference. In 1940, they were both killed in independent assassinations.²⁷ Shi Zhecun never wrote fiction again. He focused on translation

work in the 1940s and 1950s and eventually pursued an academic career in classical scholarship.

Shi Zhecun's Fiction

The majority of Shi Zhecun's creative writing was produced over the decade from 1926 to 1936. His oeuvre spans quite broadly from quiet contemplative pieces focusing on memory and nostalgia to surreal works featuring madness, absurdity, sexuality, and death. He even made a deliberate effort to make sure that his different short story collections each displayed a different aspect of his authorship.²⁸ Yet there are two threads that can be traced throughout his earliest works. First, was his interest in psychoanalysis, and as a result, several studies see Shi Zhecun principally as a Freudian author.²⁹ Looking back at his writing in 1983, he wrote that he indeed felt that it was his interest in "psychoanalytic methods" that was the connecting link between his various writings.³⁰ Second, Shi Zhecun's writing shows a consistent awareness of and experimentation with narrative technique, switching between various narrative modes and styles, including interior monologue, stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse, unreliable narrators, and the like. He was interested in the craft of writing and experimented with various techniques.

Shi Zhecun's earliest short stories were written as a teenager and submitted to popular literature journals like *Saturday* (Libailiu). He later disavowed them as plagiarism, claiming that his first works worthy of consideration were those in the short story collection *Spring Festival Lamp* (Shangyuan deng) published by Froth Bookstore in 1929. Most of these works are set in the countryside and many of them deal with nostalgia, memory, and fetishism of various sorts.

His next short story collection, *The General's Head* (Jiangjun di tou) from 1932, was far more provocative. One of the short stories, "Shi Xiu", recasts a chapter from the famous Ming dynasty novel *Water Margin* (Shuihu zhuan) using much of the language from the original text, but repurposing it into a first-person narrative.³¹ Shi's altered version is shockingly violent and brutal, and the original novel's tale of righteous justice meted out to a cheating wife and her lover is turned into a gruesome slaughter, in which the narrator takes sadistic, sexual pleasure in seeing a woman he desired being cut to pieces. Other short stories in the collection are similarly based on legend and myth, and they also feature violence, absurdity, and sexual lust. As a whole, the collection appears to be a deliberate rejection of realism, delving into the darker sides of human nature and imagination.

Shi Zhecun published two short story collections in 1933: *One Evening in the Rainy Season* (Meiyu zhi xi) and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* (Shan nüren xingpin). The two are practically diametric opposites. The former features tales of neurasthenia, delusions, madness, and displaced desire, often with a touch of gothic horror, while the latter collection features petty bourgeois women and couples who are mostly dealing with mundane matters and various issues in their lives. Shi Zhecun's last short story collection came out in 1936, after the closing of *Les Contemporains*, and features several vaguely based on traditional

huaben tales. They are generally more subdued than his earlier works and they made less of an impact.

Shi Zhecun's most famous short story is "One Evening in the Rainy Season", the title story of the collection mentioned above.³² It was originally published in 1929 and compared with the other works included, it is fairly gentle. The narrator is an office worker in Shanghai, and he starts by explaining matter-of-factly that he quite enjoys strolling home in the rain rather than taking the bus. In this, he presents himself to the audience as a typical *flâneur* who enjoys taking leisurely strolls through the city, taking in the sights and sounds of Shanghai while remaining ultimately detached from the bustle of urban life. On his way home one evening, walking along North Sichuan Road, he sees a young woman getting off a trolley bus. He watches from a distance as she gets soaked by the rain while trying in vain to hail a rickshaw in the empty streets.

I had an umbrella, and like a brave medieval warrior I could have used my umbrella as a shield, warding off the attacking spears of the rain, but instead the top half of the young woman's body was periodically drenched. Her thin black silk dress was little use against the rain and merely emphasized her soft, shapely arms. She repeatedly turned and stood sideways to avoid the drizzle attacking her breasts. But, I wondered, didn't it matter that her arms and shoulders were exposed to the rainwater, letting her dress cling to her skin?³³

Envisaging himself as a noble knight while gazing upon her wet body, it is already clear that the narrator's thoughts are slipping into fantasy and sexual desire. More than an hour passes while the narrator is observing the woman and speculating on what she might be thinking. One idea follows another as he is considering whether or not to help her.

Finally, he imagines that she is beckoning him over, so he summons the courage to approach her and offers to accompany her with his umbrella. While they are walking, various fantasies and delusions intrude, again as a stream-of-consciousness, as he is wondering what she might be thinking or who she is. He thinks she might be his first girlfriend from school many years ago, and soon after she reminds him of Japanese painting and classical poetry. Only when the rain stops, does he seem to return to the present:

It seemed as if the form of the young woman beside me had already been released from the confines of my mind. Only now did I realize night had fallen completely, and the sound of rain was no longer to be heard on the umbrella.³⁴

The girl declines to be accompanied any further, so they part ways on the street and the narrator takes a rickshaw home, wishing that the rain might have continued a little longer. His fantasies and delusions seem to linger for a while, and when his wife opens the door for him at home, he briefly imagines that she is the woman in the rain, or perhaps a woman they passed on the street. Yet this delusion quickly passes. The female characters are not interchangeable, and the short story ends with a return to everyday normality and the narrator pretending that he ate with a friend in town.

The focus of this short story is entirely on the narrator's thoughts and delusions. The rain circumscribes the narrator's dream world and after the rain stops, he slowly awakens to the world of mundane reality. The absence of rationality is also associated with the narrator's being in a state of suspension during his commute between fixed locations: his office and his home. These places are anchored in real space with colleagues and family around him, yet between these familiar spaces, the urban protagonist is a detached voyeur, treating the city as a spectacle for his enjoyment. Ultimately, it seems to be Shanghai itself which is the source of the narrator's delusions, fantasies, and displaced desire.

This short story is so reminiscent of Dai Wangshu's symbolist poem "Alley in the Rain" (Yu xiang) from 1927, that it is tempting to believe that Shi must have had it in mind when composing "One Evening in the Rainy Season".³⁵ As in the poem, the male narrator is a Shanghai resident who gazes upon an unknown beautiful woman in the rain. His sexual gaze likewise blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, revealing the confusion of his eroticized psyche. And almost inevitably, the woman vanishes in the rain without a trace.

The short story touches upon another common trope in New Sensationist fiction: the elusive woman. The narrator is endlessly wondering about her identity and her thoughts, but in the end he learns almost nothing about her. The woman remains enigmatic and unattainable. But in Shi's rendition, she is not in and of herself a femme fatale who sets out to seduce him. On the contrary, the woman is configured through a lens of irrational male fantasy and desire, with the male gaze projecting its illusions onto the female character.

"Yaksha" (Yecha) from 1933 provides another example of this process, as well as providing an example of Shi Zhecun's gothic short stories in *One Evening in the Rainy Season*. The narrator goes to a German hospital in Shanghai to visit his friend Bian who is recovering from a nervous collapse. Bian tells the narrator—starting a story in a story—that he recently visited the countryside to arrange the funeral of a grandparent. In this idyllic setting, he saw visions of an otherworldly woman dressed entirely in white in a boat on a lake. After reading a local history, he came to believe that this woman might have been a yaksha, a mythical creature who had terrorized the area in the past. One night he saw her again and ran outside to follow her, imagining that he was re-enacting a traditional *zhiguai* tale in which mortals encountered ghosts. After reaching her lair, he strangled her and only then came to his senses, realizing that she was some poor innocent woman. He rushed back to Shanghai in a terrified fervour of guilt and anxiety, finally collapsing when he saw the narrator's cousin who resembled the woman in white from before. While this short story is not set in Shanghai, it does echo "An Evening in the Rainy Season" in certain ways. Bian is very much a modern urbanite who considers himself healthy, strong, and impervious to silly superstitions, but once in the countryside his rationality falls apart and he is overtaken by delusions and madness. Several short stories in the collection see other supposedly rational and modern well-educated men succumbing to nervous distress and panic, often influenced by literature, tradition, or local myth.

"Madam Butterfly" (Hudie furen) can serve as an example of the short stories found in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*. It focuses on the slowly deteriorating relationship

of a young couple. The husband is an entomologist whose career is devoted to the study of butterflies—a traditional symbol of love—and he spends his time classifying dead specimens and resorting to foreign books to name even native Chinese species. Unlike him, his wife is far more vivacious, outgoing, and lively. Failing to understand her, he reproaches her for her frivolous pursuits: shopping, visiting beauty salons, going to the cinema, and the like. She, on the other hand, wishes that he would spend more time with her. Despite both husband and wife having the best of intentions, they fail to connect (illustrated through parallel dialogue in which they talk past each other) and gradually grow apart. The short story ends with the husband realizing that his wife is having an affair with the handsome young sports professor on campus who enjoys swimming, dancing, and partaking in all the pleasures of modern life.

Much like the other examples of Shi Zhecun’s work, this short story is about a man failing to comprehend women, but it is gentler and more subdued, without their erotic fantasies, neurasthenia, and delusions. Another short story about relationships is “Water Shield Soup” (Chun geng) which features a husband who promises his wife to do the cooking one evening but comes to feel embarrassed and conflicted about his inability to do this.

There are also a few short stories in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* that are told from the female perspective, and they are often about stirring sexual awakenings that ultimately do not come to pass. “Spring Sunshine” (Chun yang) is about a well-off young widow who travels to Shanghai to take care of a financial matter at the bank. Strolling about the city on a sunny day and seeing young couples holding hands, she starts to think that she might have a more exciting life with romance and passion.³⁶ As opposed to “One Evening in the Rainy Season”, this short story sees warm sunlight bringing about reveries. As the good weather ends, her dreams of a renewed life vanish and she leaves the city counting her money.

These examples showcase several recurring elements in Shi Zhecun’s fiction. That which is safe, well-known, and reassuring is juxtaposed with that which is mysterious, incomprehensible, and threatening—often through a change of setting or weather. This repeated juxtaposition establishes a recurrent binary pattern which aligns certain symbolic concepts and mental states. In simple schematic form, this alignment can be depicted as follows:

rational	irrational
known	unknown
conscious	repressed
modern	traditional
restrained	uninhibited
home	abroad

This divide recurs throughout Shi Zhecun’s stories of sexual roles and gender relations. The protagonist of “Yaksha” loses his grip on sanity and restraint as he crosses into the irrational in the countryside while pursuing an imaginary woman. Likewise, the inhibited woman

travels from her home in the countryside to the alluring unknown of the city. For both, the crossing into the unknown brings the protagonists in contact with their repressed yearnings and desires. In most cases, crossing back to “normality” and restraint is traumatic, resulting in nervous fears or burst illusions.

Yet the simple dividing line above is perhaps not the most appropriate graphic representation. In Shi’s short stories, the world of the unknown is not an external reality but rather a mental construction emerging from the unconscious. Therefore it should perhaps be nested as a fictive space *within* rational modernity which challenges the characters’ conception of the world. In Shi’s work, it is the very modernity and rationality of the modern mind that seems to bring about the dreams and worries that undermine it. Modern rationality invariably crumbles of its own accord and thereby notions of progress and modernity become questionable constructs that contain the seeds of their own collapse.

The Fiction of Mu Shiying and Liu Na’ou

The short stories by Mu Shiying and Liu Na’ou are similar enough that they might be discussed together. In most of their works, the plot seems less important than a sensory mood achieved through a staccato narrative style. They use all varieties of sensory impressions—colours, temperatures, sounds, and smells—to describe the jumbled sensations of the metropolis. The discontinuities in the text are meant to reflect the disjointed and chaotic urban experience.

The 1932 short story “Five in a Nightclub” (Yezonghuili de wu ge ren) is one of Mu’s more well-known works and it can serve as an example. The narrative switches between five principal characters as they separately make their way to the Empress night club. The following quote shows how the narrative style is the main focus and takes precedence over plot progression:

The world of a Saturday night is a cartoon globe spinning on the axis of jazz—just as quick, just as crazed; gravity loses its pull and buildings are launched skyward.

On Saturday night reason is out of season.

On Saturday night even judges are tempted to lead lives of crime.

On Saturday night God goes to Hell.

Men out on dates completely forget the civil code against seduction. Every woman out on a date tells her man that she is not yet eighteen, all the while laughing inside over how easy he is to dupe. The driver’s eyes stray from the pedestrians on the road to admire his lover’s scenic contours; hands move forward to probe.

On Saturday night a self-respecting man steals; a simpleton’s head fills with intrigue; a God-fearing Christian lies; old men drink rejuvenating tonics; experienced women apply kiss-proof lipstick.³⁷

The plot in “Five in a Nightclub” mostly unfolds over the course of a single day: Saturday, 6 April 1932. It features five different characters, and the narrative shifts between them until

they converge in a nightclub to drown and forget their sorrows: an investor lost his fortune, a woman tries to face that men now see her as past her prime, a man has been jilted, a scholar questions the relevance of his work, and a city clerk has been fired. At the nightclub they meet a band member, who learns that his wife has died in childbirth during the course of the evening. Still, he is forced to smile and play music in the club as the guests dance, laugh, and pretend to enjoy themselves. The short story ends with the investor killing himself and the four others attending his funeral a few days later.

The relationships between the characters are callous, hypocritical, and insincere. They are all presenting various façades, laughing and deceiving themselves, trying to keep up with the times, peppering their speech with English phrases. As in many of Mu's other short stories, Shanghai is presented as titillating and exhilarating, while also being exhausting, dehumanizing, and cruel.

The five characters are not so much individuals as representatives of different aspects of the city. Compared with Shi Zhecun's intricate character portrayals or, say, the writings of Western modernists such as James Joyce, the various people in Mu's short stories tend to have little psychological depth. Instead, they are often stereotypes akin to those in popular literature, like the femme fatale, the dandy, or the infatuated gullible male, yet this superficiality is also somehow symptomatic of their modern lives. It seems to be the city and the constant demands it places on the people in it that force them into predetermined roles, keeping up appearances.

Both Mu Shiying and Liu Na'ou frequently use the femme fatale stereotype as a symbol of the new sexual mores in modern Shanghai. Mu Shiying's short story "The Man Who Was Made a Plaything" can be used as an illustration.³⁸ The narrator is a university student in Shanghai who falls desperately in love with an alluring beauty despite his complete awareness that she is deceitful and dangerous. She professes to love him as well, but nevertheless, she is constantly flirting with other men and this in turn drives the narrator to despair. She informs him that the others are merely playthings to her, like chocolates to be chewed and spat out.³⁹ After much jealousy and misery, the narrator realizes that he too has merely been her plaything.

The femmes fatales of Mu Shiying and Liu Na'ou's fiction were indebted to Hollywood's glamorous screen icons, frequently mentioned in their works. As confident New Women, flappers, or femme fatale vixens, these women are well-known stereotypes also found in pulp fiction, romances, calendar posters, and advertising. Likewise, sexuality is often highlighted as synonymous with the modernity of Shanghai. In one short story, "Platinum Statue of a Female Nude" (Baijin de nǚti suoxiang), Mu even uses Shanghai's harbour as a metaphor for the female sex.⁴⁰

Similar to Mu Shiying, Liu Na'ou's short stories also take place in Shanghai's night clubs or other places signifying modernity, e.g. the race track or canidrome, and they frequently deal with naïve men, sometimes foreigners, who are jilted, duped, and dumped by bewitching modern women. His staccato style of writing is laden with metaphor and juxtaposed images:

Everything in this “Tango Palace” is in melodious motion—male and female bodies, multicolored lights, shining wine goblets, red, green liquid and slender fingers, garnet lips, burning eyes. In the center is a smooth and shiny floor reflecting tables and chairs around it and the scene of people mixed together, making one feel as if one had entered a magic palace, where one’s mind and spirit are both under the control of magical powers. Amidst all this the most delicate and nimble are the movements of those waiters clad in white. Vivaciously, like butterflies among flowers, they fly from here to there, then from there to another place, without a trace of rudeness.⁴¹

The prose of Mu Shiying and Liu Na’ou is striking with its predominant use of sharp visual imagery. The text aims to dazzle the reader with a barrage of sensory input that mirrors the chaos of the city. To both writers, narrative style was more important than plot. The montage or “camera eye” technique of switching from item to item to set the scene was adopted from the Japanese New Sensationists and the French writer Paul Morand.⁴² Like the shop fronts, posters, and neon signs on Nanjing Road, modernity is here represented in striking images. As Leo Ou-fan Lee remarks, this narrative style was indebted to the visuality and speed of the cinema.⁴³ Relying on the readers’ knowledge of billboards and neon ads, Liu and Mu count on visual cues to achieve their effects. The use of imagery carries from the billboards and dance halls to women and sexuality.

Mu Shiying’s writing changed considerably over the course of his short career. His earliest short stories, some written while he was still a teenager, were quite different from the modernist works which made him famous.⁴⁴ These initial works tend to feature impoverished male protagonists who rage against society and modern life, but they are not proletarian visionaries or victims of social injustice. On the contrary, they are mostly misguided thugs and bandits who revel in random violence while representing themselves as righteous heroes. They often cast themselves as characters out of *Water Margin*, demonstrating their inability to comprehend modern society and their entanglement in an imaginary vision of the past.

In Mu Shiying’s first short story, “Our World”, the narrator recounts how he became a pirate, eventually joining a gang of outlaws who board a large passenger ship.⁴⁵ The narrator is constantly furious about social issues, but most of his anger stems from his sexual frustration and lust for modern women who are out of his reach. After taking over the ship, he rapes an innocent woman and throws her husband overboard in a rite of initiation. He describes this violence with disturbing glee, and this narrative style makes for a remarkably unpleasant narrator. These early works also demonstrate Mu’s ability to capture lower class slang and vulgar language in a way that had not been seen before in Chinese literature. Several other works in Mu’s first short story collection, *North Pole, South Pole*, are equally disconcerting, and they show that Mu was already quite mature as a writer of fiction.

Conclusion

New Sensationist fiction portrayed the splitting forces of urban modernity—in subject matter as well as style of writing. But unlike the League of Left-Wing writers, these authors did not

moralize, nor did they offer solutions, political critiques, or noble ideals in their work. On the contrary, the New Sensationists adopted an avant-garde stance based on a dual rejection of political ideology and realist narrative modes. Their independence enabled them to create works that were distinctly different from the other literature being written at the time.

In their modernist works, the New Sensationists attempted to renew the language and form of narrative representation. By mixing tropes and stereotypes from popular literature, traditional fiction, legend, and myth, they present intertextual hybrids that often cross back and forth between different genres and styles, deliberately undermining their own narrative coherence. Rather than seeking verisimilitude, such short stories deliberately highlight their own status as artifice and fiction.

Through jarring language, juxtaposed imagery, and streams-of-consciousness, New Sensationist works set out to mirror the dizzying nature of modern Shanghai. The city becomes a contested site of clashing opposites, exemplified in the oft-quoted opening and closing lines of Mu Shiying's short story "Shanghai Foxtrot" (Shanghai de hubuwu, 1932): "Shanghai. A Heaven built on Hell."⁴⁶ More broadly, it is modernity itself that comes under attack. In Mu Shiying and Liu Na'ou's work, modern life is exhausting and dehumanizing, while in Shi Zhecun's rendition, the rational, educated outlook is always on the verge of collapse into fantasy, delusions, and madness. Modernity is thrilling, but it also invariably contains a darker side that is repressed, denied, or hidden behind gay outward facades.

The New Sensationist writers revelled in the depiction of sexuality. As Yingjin Zhang notes, "eroticism took the place of love in the majority of new perceptionist writings".⁴⁷ Sex was the essential modern drive and symptomatic of urban dissolution. Like the other New Sensationist writers, Shi Zhecun also used the idea of fleeting sexual encounters as representing Shanghai's urban modernity, but he brought a new psychological depth to his characters, utilizing the full Freudian armament of unconscious desires with repression and displacement. His soul-searching characters are generally more rounded and engaging than those of Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiying. Furthermore, he expanded the scope of his writings to include modern sexuality in other ways than urban encounters. Many of his short stories have historical settings, playing on ideas of popular myth and fiction.

The New Sensationist group played an important role in the literary field at the time. Shi Zhecun in particular stands out for his many translations of foreign literature and his work as the editor of *Les Contemporains*. Due to political exigencies, the New Sensationist writers were ignored or forgotten for several decades, but Shi Zhecun and Mu Shiying are fairly well-known writers today, and awareness of their work has improved in recent years alongside the rise in nostalgia for the glamour of Republican Shanghai. More recently, studies have explored how the New Sensationist writers had an impact on later Chinese literature, e.g. Wang Zengqi and Fei Ming as well as popular literature during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).⁴⁸ The New Sensationist works had a lasting impact as well as real literary value in their own right.

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- ¹ There is unfortunately little agreement on how to render *xinganjuepai* in English. Alternatives include “New Sensibilities School”, “Neo-sensationism”, “New Perceptionism”, and several others.
- ² “Shinkankaku school,” in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, vol. 7, edited by Gen Itasaka et al. (Tokyo: Kodansha Ltd., 1983), p. 116.
- ³ Lou Shiyi. “Shi Zhecun de xin ganjue zhuyi — Du ‘Zai Bali daxi yuan’ yu ‘Modao’ zhi hou (The New Sensationism of Shi Zhecun — On reading ”In the Paris cinema” and ”Demon’s way”), in *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia xuanji: Shi Zhecun* (Selections of modern Chinese authors: Shi Zhecun) edited by Ying Guojing 應國靖 (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian youxian gongsi, 1988), p. 306.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- ⁵ Shi Zhecun, “Wo de chuangzuo shenghuo zhi licheng” (The course of my creative career), in *Shi Zhecun wenji: Shi nian chuangzuo ji* (The works of Shi Zhecun: Ten years of creative writing) (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1996), pp. 803 – 804.
- ⁶ Shi Zhecun, “Zhendan er nian” (Two years at Aurora University), in *Wangshi suixiang* (Random thoughts on past events), edited by Tang Wenyi and Liu Pin (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2000), pp. 185 – 196.
- ⁷ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 246.
- ⁸ Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking: Crossing Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922-1938* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 133.
- ⁹ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 359.
- ¹⁰ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930 – 1945* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 148, 177.
- ¹¹ Most studies mention that Mu Shiyong was born in Cixi, but Li Jin makes a convincing argument that he was born in Shanghai. See Li Jin, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian” (A short chronicle of Mu Shiyong), *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 2005, no. 6, p. 237.
- ¹² Li Jin, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian”, p. 240.
- ¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 240.
- ¹⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, p. 134.
- ¹⁵ Qu Qiubai (pseud. Sima Jin), “Caishen haishi fan caishen” (For or against the God of wealth), *Beidou*, vol. 2, nos. 3-4 (1932): 489–500.
- ¹⁶ Shu Yue quoted in Christopher Rosenmeier, “The Subversion of Modernity and Socialism in Mu Shiyong’s Early Fiction,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2013), p. 17.
- ¹⁷ Mu Shiyong quoted in *ibid.*, p. 18.
- ¹⁸ Li Jin, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian”, pp. 243-253.
- ¹⁹ Ying Guojing, “Shi Zhecun nianbiao”, in *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia xuanji: Shi Zhecun* (Selections of modern Chinese authors: Shi Zhecun), edited by Ying Guojing (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian youxian gongsi, 1988), p. 314.
- ²⁰ Shi Zhecun, “Xiandai zayi” (Some thoughts on Xiandai), in *Wangshi suixiang*, p. 65.
- ²¹ Complete lists of tables of content from all issues of *Les Contemporains* can be found in *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue qikan hui lu huibian* (Compilation of tables of contents of journals in modern Chinese literature), vol. 1, edited by Tang Yuan et al. (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1988), p. 1329 ff.
- ²² Shi Zhecun, “Xiandai zayi”, p. 66.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

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- ²⁴ Wang-chi Wong, *Politics and Literature in Shanghai: The Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers, 1930–1936* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 131.
- ²⁵ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, p. 149.
- ²⁶ Li Jin, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian”, p. 260.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.
- ²⁸ Christopher Rosenmeier, “Women Stereotypes in Shi Zhecun’s Short Stories,” *Modern China*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2011), p. 12.
- ²⁹ Wu Lichang, Preface in Shi Zhecun, *Xinli xiaoshuo: Shi Zhecun* (Shi Zhecun: Psychological fiction) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1992), p. 2.
- ³⁰ Shi Zhecun, Preface in *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia xuanji: Shi Zhecun*, p. 2.
- ³¹ William Schaefer, “Kumarajiva’s Foreign Tongue: Shi Zhecun’s Modernist Historical Fiction,” *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 10, nos. 1&2 (1998).
- ³² Shi Zhecun, “One Evening in the Rainy Season”, trans. Gregory B. Lee, in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, 2nd edition, edited by Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 116–124.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.
- ³⁵ See chapter 11 on Dai Wangshu.
- ³⁶ Shi Zhecun, “Chun yang”, in Shi Zhecun, *Shi Zhecun wenji: Shi nian chuangzuo ji*, pp. 432 – 445.
- ³⁷ Mu Shiyong, “Five in a Nightclub,” trans. Randolph Trumbull, in Mu Shiyong, *Mu Shiyong: China’s Lost Modernist*, edited by Andrew David Field (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), p. 42.
- ³⁸ Mu Shiyong, “Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi” (The man who was made a plaything) in *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* (The Chinese master of New Sensationism: the complete fiction of Mu Shiyong), edited by Yue Qi (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1996), pp. 151–176.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 153.
- ⁴⁰ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, p. 216.
- ⁴¹ Translated in Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, p. 288. From Liu Na’ou, “Youxi” (Games).
- ⁴² Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, p. 199.
- ⁴³ Leo Ou-fan Lee, “The Urban Milieu of Shanghai Cinema, 1930 – 1940” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922 – 1943*, edited by Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 81.
- ⁴⁴ Christopher Rosenmeier, “The Subversion of Modernity and Socialism in Mu Shiyong’s Early Fiction,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 7, no. 1.
- ⁴⁵ Mu Shiyong, “Zanmen de shijie” (Our world) in *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji*, pp. 17 - 29
- ⁴⁶ Mu Shiyong, “Shanghai Fox-trot,” trans. Andrew David Field, in Mu Shiyong, *Mu Shiyong: China’s Lost Modernist*, edited by Andrew David Field (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), p. 105.
- ⁴⁷ Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configuration of Space, Time, & Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 176.
- ⁴⁸ See Carolyn Fitzgerald, *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) and Christopher Rosenmeier, *On the Margins of Modernism: Xu Xu, Wumingshi, and Popular Chinese Literature in the 1940s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

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